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Friendship in Aristotle

Leonardo Polo

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to show the difference between Aristotle's conception of friendship and the Christian charity. While the pagan charity only search for happiness in this life, the Christian charity moreover point out the eternal destiny in all the men and magnify the friendship in this life.

KEYWORDS: Friendship, Charity, Person, Happiness, Destiny.

In classical philosophy the distinction between intelligence and will is taken from the distinct intentionality of its acts. The intentionality of the intellectual acts is by likeness, while that of the voluntary acts points to the other. According to likeness, one knows the truth, and according to otherness, one tends to the good.

Goods are divided into means and ends. It is not unfitting to admit that the means are things, no matter how preferable it is to say that they are works produced by action, which is a voluntary act. It still remains to determine what is understood by final goods. In my opinion, the good that has the *ratio* of end is the person; firstly, human persons. For this reason it is not strange that Aristotelian ethics pays special attention to the virtue of friendship. Plato deals with friendship in his dialogue *Lysis*, and develops his theory of love in the *Symposium*. In the *Lysis*, Socrates says that friendship rests on love and that it is regulated by virtue. The love of friendship must be mutual, and thus brings with it a correlation of freedoms: the good of a friend must be looked after. I will now explain the ethical meaning of friendship and relate it with Christian love.

I

Aristotle dedicates books VII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the study of friendship (*philia*—he mentions *agape* at least once). He states, from the beginning, that it is a virtue and that it comes with virtue, and he holds that it is what is most necessary (*anakaioiuton*) for life. No one would want to live without friends even though he possessed all other goods, because prosperity is useless if one is deprived of the possibility of doing good, which is carried out, above all, with friends. Furthermore, during misfortune, friends are considered as the only refuge. I summarize the passages in which Aristotle specifies these dimensions of friendship:

“On the other hand, the presence of friends in our prosperity implies both a pleasant passing of our time and the pleasant thought of their pleasure at our own good fortune. For this cause it would seem that we ought to summon our friends readily to share our good fortunes (for the beneficent character is a noble one), but summon them to our bad fortunes with hesitation; for we ought to give them as little a share as possible in our evils whence the saying ‘enough is my misfortune’. We should summon friends to us most of all when they are

likely by suffering a few inconveniences to do us a great service. Conversely, it is fitting to go unasked and readily to the aid of those in adversity (for it is characteristic of a friend to render services, and especially to those who are in need and have not demanded them; such action is nobler and pleasanter for both persons); but when our friends are prosperous we should join readily in their activities (for they need friends for these too), but be tardy in coming forward to be the objects of their kindness; for it is not noble to be keen to receive benefits”¹.

“This is why the question is asked whether we need friends more in prosperity or in adversity, on the assumption that not only does a man in adversity need people to confer benefits on him, but also those who are prospering need people to do well by. Surely it is strange, too, to make the supremely happy man solitary; for no one would choose the whole world on condition of being alone (...) Therefore the happy man needs friends”².

Men, even though they to be just, need friendship; and just men are the ones that are most capable of friendship. Friendship is, in addition to being necessary, beautiful. For this reason those who love their friends are praised, and good men are even equated with friendly ones. Aristotle then presents three types of friendship. In each one there is reciprocity; without some type of reciprocity, friendship is impossible. For this reason it would be ridiculous to desire the wine's good; its conservation is only desired for having it. It must be kept in mind that wine is a medial good.

The first type is perfect friendship, which is found among men that are good and equal in virtue, since these desire each other's good insofar as they are good in themselves (*kath-auto*). This type of friendship is more permanent. However, these friendships are rare because such men are few and, also, requires dealings because without it, there can be no mutual knowledge. The desire of friendship arises quickly, but not the friendship.

The second type of friendship is that of those who love each other for *interest*; not for themselves, but rather to the extent that they benefit each other with regard to something. The third type of friendship

¹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX 1171 b 14-25 (translation by W. D. Ross).

² ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX 1169 b 15-21 (translation by W. D. Ross).

is that of those who love each other for pleasure. Therefore, among those who love each other because of interest, friendship is due to the proper good; and among those who love each other because of pleasure, to their own liking. In these cases, friendship is subordinated to the medial goods. In sum, these two types of friendship are imperfect, and for this reason easy to dissolve: when they are no longer useful or pleasant to each other, the friendship disappears.

Complaints and recriminations are proper to the friendship of interest. In contrast, they are not present in true friendship. For this reason, someone who has received more benefits than his friend is not reproached, since the two seek to exchange goods. Evil men can be friends in the last two ways, because evil persons do not delight in each other unless some advantage or pleasure exists.

In the first kind of friendship the friend is defended from accusations, because it is not easy to believe what someone else says of a friend, with whom one has dealt with for a long time. Furthermore, among good persons there is mutual trust and the impossibility of taking offense, and all the other requirements of true friendship. In contrast, in the other types of friendship there is a mixture of some evil, for which reason, strictly speaking, they are friendship only by analogy.

The virtue of a friend consists in loving [*querer*]. For this reason flatterers are not true friends nor those who seek their own profit. Since loving is an activity (*energeia*), friendship is most excellent in the most active human beings.

From here, Aristotle examines how the different political regimes favor or degrade friendship. On the other hand, the good man's intellect makes him abundantly fit for *contemplation*. For this reason, the good man is concordant with his friends and seeks their company, but can also spend some time with himself inasmuch as he contemplates, although later, because of the effusion that friendship entails, he communicates it to a friend.

The essence of friendship lies in sharing and in conversation and in empathizing with each other. In this man finds himself in the same relation with respect to a friend that he has with himself. For this reason Aristotle argues that a friend is another self, an idea that Cicero repeats. Adulation, flattery and subservience are incompatible with friendship, because they are contrary to the love for the truth.

Ultimately, friendship lies in a moral growth that is facilitated by the joint actions that it orders. The acts of this virtue consist in cooperating. Cooperation implies equality, which is characteristic of friendship: the intention of the other increases insofar as it is common, in such a way that friends help each other in this task, and not only in remedying unfortunate situations.

These discoveries of Aristotle are very relevant. I will point out the following extremes. First, that true friendship emphasizes the good that is found in the human person as a final good. A man is loved because he is good, and the good is loved because it is human. The evil man is not capable of true friendship. He is incapable of delighting in the good and of appreciating it in another, because neither is he capable of appreciating it in himself as good, since he is not. His intention of other is deficient and is not ratified by himself.

Second, having clarified the reciprocity of friendship, it is clear that *philia* entails a legitimate *autophilia*. If a friend is another self, then oneself is also a self. Martin Buber's musings concerning the *I-thou* relationship, and that of Emmanuel Levinas concerning the *other* add nothing new, and are even less well balanced than the Aristotelian position.

Loving oneself is usually called selfishness. Aristotle's position on this issue is very clear: he censures those who love themselves more than anyone else, and he calls them selfish as if this were shameful. The man of base condition does everything for love of self, and even more so the worse he is; for this reason he is reproached for not doing anything apart from his own interest. In contrast, the good person acts out of honor, and even more so the better he is, or for his friend and puts aside that which concerns him; the best friend is he who loves the good of he whom he loves for their own sake. But this applies best of all to oneself, because each one is one's best friend; therefore, we must love ourselves above all³.

Aristotle clarifies the question of selfishness by looking to the goods that are sought. The selfishness of bad men consists in assigning the greatest quantity of wealth, honor and corporal pleasure to themselves. Those who are greedy for these things seek to satisfy their desires, and, in general, the irrational part of their soul. Since this

³ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1168 a 28-35; 1168 b 1-14.

happens frequently, the epithet of the selfish man has acquired a pejorative meaning, because love of oneself is for the most part evil. Now, it is clear that if someone is always striving to practice virtue, and to follow the path of virtue, then he would not be called selfish, nor would he be censured. But a man like this is more a lover of self than one who is bad: he takes the highest goods and satisfies the principal part of his self. For this reason he will also be lover of himself to a higher degree than he who is the object of censure, and he is as distinct from that man as living according to reason is from living in accordance to the passions and he will aspire to what is virtuous without reducing himself to what seems useful. Indeed, if everyone were to compete in carrying out the best actions, then community matters would function as they should.

In sum, the good man must be a lover of self, because in this way he benefits himself and, at the same time, he will be useful for others. In contrast, the evil man must not be so, because in this way he harms both himself and his neighbor. It is also true, that the good man does many things for the sake of his friends and for his country, even unto dying for them if it is necessary. And he would rather live nobly for a year than to live many in just any way whatsoever. He will also divest himself of his money so that his friends might have more; a friend will thus have money and will have glory. Therefore, he chooses for himself the greatest good⁴.

It is clear that Aristotle is inspired by Socrates, as Plato presents him in the *Gorgias*: good action benefits he who does it more than he who is benefited by it, and bad action harms he who does it more than it does the victim.

In sum, the measure of ethics is found in virtue and in the good man. Friendship is reciprocal because it consists in loving. Compared with loving, being loved is passive; consequently, friendship exists only if the friends are active. If a friend limits himself to waiting for benefits, then the friendship disappears. Philanthropy appears in its place. For this reason, Thomas Aquinas argues that he who loves seeks not only the loved one, but also their love. And this is true to the point that if the love is not reciprocal, it is extinguished⁵

⁴ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 1168 b 15-35; 1169 a 1-37.

⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 151.

Man can only love himself if he is good; the evil man cannot find delight in himself if there is no possibility of some profit, which strictly speaking is different from himself, since what he profits from is a medial good. But only if the man is good will his intention of the other be complete. For this reason Aristotle says that friendship is accompanied by virtues, and that without them friendship is not possible.

II

Christian friendship differs from the pagan sense of friendship, which was exclusivist; one loved a friend and hated the enemy. Also, for Aristotle, friends are few. To this it should be added that Aristotle does not see how one can be a friend of God, because friendship is between equals. From this he concludes that a friend does not want the greatest goods for his friend, because if his friend were divinized, he would cease being a friend.

The *Gospel* of charity surprised the pagans, because it brought with it brotherhood of spirit in accordance with divine filiation. However, Christian charity, which elevates friendship, must also have characteristics that are proper to it.

Thomas Aquinas holds that friendship is a virtue. He knows the *Nicomachean Ethics* well, and comments upon it calmly and in an almost literal way; but he also argues that friendship and charity are different. For this reason, in the *Summa Theologica*, strictly speaking, he does not speak of friendship, but rather of charity⁶.

The Aristotelian virtues tend to natural happiness. In contrast the Christian man pursues perfect happiness, something that is not possible without the support of the love of charity.

Nevertheless, charity cannot leave friendship aside, first of all, because Jesus Christ made us his friends. Since charity is completely universal, since there is also love for enemies, it is not confused with human friendship, except as a mere disposition, since it is not possible to be everyone's friend. Now, if one completely does away with friendship and reduces the love of Christians to fraternity, then this can lose operativity and become insipid.

⁶ A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *Estudio sobre la amistad*, Rialp, Madrid, 1975, p. 68.

Although this assessment is not characteristic of the ancient pagans, it has been formulated by the modern critics of Christianity. When charity cools off, it usually becomes rigid, and loses its vitality or is reduced to a philanthropic sentiment. Philanthropy is directed to humanity in general, that is, to an abstraction. For this reason it is subject to crisis, as noted by the Scottish moralists since David Hume, and also by August Comte. Given these cases, the modern critique has a point. However, it is directed toward a caricature of true charity.

To begin with, Christian charity points to the eternal destiny of man and not only to happiness in this life. But, furthermore, it perfects human friendship. This can be gleaned from the description that **St. Paul makes of this virtue**: “Charity is patient, is kind; charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices at the victory of truth; **sustains, believes, hopes, endures, to the last**”⁷.

Glossing upon this text, it can be said that fidelity and loyalty are dimensions of friendship; these dimensions show its constancy. To these, sincerity, respect, generosity, and affection must be added. Sincerity is speaking straightforwardly and with trust, as well as disagreeing without hypocrisy and freely opening up one's interior: this is called frankness. Generosity entails not giving importance to little defects that we all have, and leads to giving ample credit to a friend.

Truthfulness is also a dimension of friendship, which links it to freedom, and is incompatible with constriction. But a friend is not left alone if he falls into errors of certain gravity, but rather he is corrected. In this sense friendship has a pedagogical value. A friend is, indeed, another self. Correction is an appeal to the friend's *synderesis*, the light of which is incompatible with grave errors, especially with regard to loving. In sum, correcting a friend is a manifestation of the elevation of prudence and of justice as virtues that accompany friendship.

Prudence is the corrector of voluntary acts aimed at the means. For its part, the just correction has a penal character. In contrast, the friendly correction attempts to directly reestablish the purity of a friend's conduct.

⁷ ST. PAUL, *First Letter to the Corinthians* 13:4-7.

AIMS AND SCOPE

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